

Musical News and Happenings

Amsterdam Festival Recalls Centenary Of Cesar Franck

Willem Mengelberg and his orchestra, the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, will give, it is announced, a Cesar Franck festival concert at Amsterdam and at The Hague on December 7 and 8, in which Eleanore Spencer, the American pianist, will play the Symphonic Variations—which calls attention to the approaching hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the most attractive characters in the history of music. Cesar Franck may be considered to have led a peaceful, happy life, even though he did not begin to win general recognition until the year before his death. The neglect and opposition shown toward him in reigning French musical circles might have stirred a musician possessing the traditional "temperament" to fury, but Franck took it philosophically, even cheerfully. His life was one of continuous hard work, spent largely in teaching pupils of all kinds, some promising, many the reverse; a life without any sensational incidents, but always devoted to his music.

Cesar Franck was born at Liege, in Belgium, on December 10, 1822, in a region which Vincent d'Indy finds very like central France in appearance, but "German in customs and surroundings." His father, termed by d'Indy "a man of stern and autocratic character," decided that Cesar and his brother should become professional musicians, and entered him at the Liege Music School. At the age of ten, on a tour of Belgium, Cesar met a famous child-musician only a year older than himself, the singer Pauline Garcia, afterward Mme. Viardot. Two years later he completed his course at the Liege school, and in 1836 the Francks moved to Paris. Cesar entered the Conservatoire in 1837, studying composition and piano, and soon won the award "proximo accessit" for fugue.

Signs of the composer's originality appeared in the pianoforte competition of 1848, when, after an excellent performance of Hummel's A Minor Concerto, the young musician conceived the idea of transposing the piece set before him to a key one-third lower, and forthwith did so with equal ease. He obviously deserved the first prize, but Cherubini, then at the head of the Conservatoire, was shocked at the innovation and refused to award it, but finally recognized Franck's performance by proposing a special award called "Grand Prix d'Honneur." This was the only time, according to M. d'Indy, in the history of the Conservatoire, that such a prize was ever given. Franck won the second prize for fugue in the competition of 1853, horrifying his father by finishing his examination and walking out long before the closing hour, with all the others still struggling with the questions. The elder Franck reproved him for this apparent carelessness, but the young man only smiled, and answered, "I think it is all right."

He won the first prize for fugue in 1840, in spite of an ungrateful set subject, and the next year, as a pupil of Andre Benoit, competed for the organ prize. The tests are traditional—deviating an accompaniment for plain chant chosen for the occasion, the performance of an organ piece with pedal and the improvisations of a fugue and of a piece in sonata form on themes chosen by the examiners. Here Franck's love of originality found another opportunity, and he treated the subjects simultaneously, a brilliant performance, but its length of development quite bewildered the examiners, who at first proposed to award him nothing, but eventually gave him a second prize.

Franck was beginning his preparations for the Prix de Rome, but suddenly, in April, 1842, his father removed him from the Conservatoire and told him to prepare for the career of a virtuoso pianist. This, observes d'Indy, was just the period when such pianists were having their greatest vogue, when Liszt and Thalberg, for instance, held the center of the stage in the capitals of Europe. Such careers had dazzled the elder Franck, who was determined on a similar fame for his sons. Cesar returned to Belgium and complied with his father's wishes. In the life which he now was leading there was little opportunity for serious study, but these two years were not entirely barren. His three trios were dedicated to King Leopold, in the hope that royal recognition would carry the young pianist far forward on his road to celebrity. But the King failed to respond, and in 1844 the Francks returned to Paris, taking an apartment on the Rue de la Bruyere.

where they lived on the money earned by the sons. Times were hard, and Cesar had to devote every minute of the day to teaching, while he managed, nevertheless, to find regular time for composition. He led a life of regular and unceasing industry, during which, remarks M. d'Indy, "his sole diversion was a concert—at rare intervals—at which one of his own works was given." His "Biblical elogue," "Ruth," written in 1846, had its first performance in the concert room of the Conservatoire, but was condemned as a poor imitation of Felix David's "Le Desert."

Meanwhile, making a living grew increasingly difficult, as the disturbances of 1848 were driving his richer pupils out of Paris. But such was the time that Franck chose to get married. His bride was the daughter of a well known tragedian, a fact which scandalized the composer's parents. The idea of marrying a "theatrical person!" The wedding itself, held at the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette, where Franck was organist, was not without its difficulties. It was February 22, 1848, with the Revolution in full swing, and in order to reach the church, the wedding party had to climb a barricade with the will of the insurgents behind it. His marriage brought about his decision to live away from his parents, while he had to work even harder than before; but, even in this period of high pressure, he determined to set aside an hour or two every day as "time for thought."

This quiet but incessantly busy life of teaching, with his work as organist and hours set apart for composition, was followed by him for many years. His fortunes during the next ten years began slowly to improve. He became organist at the Church of St. Jean-St. Francois, and in 1858 was given command of the new organ in the basilica of Ste. Clotilde.

"Here," writes d'Indy, "in the dusk of the organ loft, of which I cannot speak without emotion, he spent the best part of his life." "Ah," he continues, "we know it well, who were his pupils, the way up to the three-blessed organ loft—a way as steep and difficult as that which the Gospel tells us leads to Paradise. First, having climbed the dark, spiral staircase, lit by an occasional loophole, we suddenly came face to face with a kind of antediluvian monster, a complicated bony structure breathing heavily and irregularly, which on close examination proved to be the vital portion of the organ, worked by a vigorous pair of bellows. Next we had to descend a narrow staircase in pitch darkness, a fatal ordeal to high hats and the cause of many a slip to the uninitiated. Opening the narrow 'janua coli,' we found ourselves suspended, as it were, midway between the pavement and the vaulted roof of the church, and the next moment all was forgotten in the contemplation of that rapt profile and the intellectual brow from which seemed to flow without any effort a stream of inspired melody and subtle, exquisite harmonies which lingered for a moment among the pillars of the nave before they ascended and died away in the vaulted heights of the roof. Franck had, or rather was, the genius of improvisation. In 1880 Liszt left the church in amazement, . . . invoking the name of Bach in an inevitable comparison. On the street, hurrying from class to class, he was described by a publisher as 'a man always in a hurry, always dressed in black, and who wore his trousers too short.'"

His next ten years were quiet and devoted to church music, but the year 1870 inspired his patriotic spirit—he had already been naturalized as a Frenchman.

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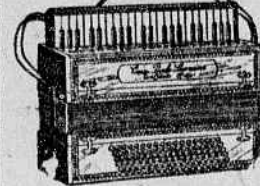
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